



REVIEW ESSAY

Field Work

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George Steinmetz, *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: French Sociology and Overseas Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023) Amín Pérez, *Bourdieu and Sayad against Empire: Forging Sociology in Anticolonial Struggle*, transl. Andrew Brown (London: Polity, 2024); first published as Amín Pérez, *Combattre en sociologues Pierre Bourdieu et Abdelmalek Sayad dans une guerre de libération* (Algérie, 1958–1964) (Paris: Agone, 2022)

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For decades now, scholars specializing in imperial history and decolonization have traced the relationships between the social sciences and European imperial control.¹ Indeed, many scholars working in postcolonial veins now take for granted the deep connections between empire and forms of knowledge production and knowledge legitimization. Imperial control over territory provided privileged spaces and populations for the practice of social science in disciplines such as ethnography, anthropology, sociology, demography, and archaeology to gather data and artifacts, to test hypotheses. One of the key factors that facilitated early twentieth-century British archaeologists' discoveries in Egypt, for instance, was the direct control that British imperial sponsors could exert to support and protect a given excavation. It was Napoleon's French

¹ A non-exhaustive list: Durba Mitra, *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought* (Princeton, 2020); Neil MacMaster, *War in the Mountains: Peasant Society and Counterinsurgency in Algeria, 1918–1958* (Oxford, 2020); “Roundtable: Historicizing Science in the Modern State,” *International Journal of Mid-East Studies* 47/3 (2015), 555–91; Alice Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850–1950* (Ithaca, 2013); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (2002) (Berkeley 2010); Osama Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria* (Stanford, 2010); Karl Ittman, Dennis Cordell, and Gregory H. Maddox, eds., *The Demographics of Empire: The Colonial Order and the Creation of Knowledge* (Athens, 2010); Patricia Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Race in Colonial Algeria* (1995), new edn (Lincoln, 2014); Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 1995); Angela Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago, 2001); Christophe Bonneuil, *Des savants pour l'empire: La structuration des recherches scientifiques coloniales au temps de “la mise en valeur des colonies françaises”, 1917–1945* (Paris, 1991); George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1987); Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London, 1975). This list of works could easily multiply tenfold if it included biographical and autobiographical studies of individual thinkers.

forces who first laid claim to the Rosetta Stone before the British defeated them and whisked the stone away to the British Museum. Indeed, some of the earliest practicing ethnographers and social theorists were imperial military officers with a stake in making sense of the people and territories they were charged with controlling. The literature they produced influenced discussions of what counted as human, what it meant to live in a social state, and which forms of difference could be attributed to natural variance versus cultural habit.² The knowledge–power relationship that Michel Foucault analyzed for metropolitan spaces extended into imperial territories as well. As European states grew more knowledge-hungry in the growth of their bureaucratic and administrative apparatus over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these dynamics intensified. Any image of an abstract, apolitical social science is belied by the intimate connections between the imperial conditions under which social scientists developed their disciplines.

Both the works under review here interrogate the relationship between the French Empire, decolonization, political commitment, and sociology, albeit in very different ways. Despite the existing literature on this subject, both authors expand our knowledge of the connections between the French Empire and sociology as a discipline, as well as pointing to new areas for future research.

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George Steinmetz's *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: French Sociology and the Overseas Empire* aims to be the first comprehensive study tracking the connections between the professionalization of modern French sociology as its own distinct field apart from ethnography and anthropology (roughly from 1930 to 1960), and France's overseas empire. To achieve this, Steinmetz employs an approach he labels a "neo-Bourdieuian historical sociology of science" (17). This approach is a reworking insofar as it draws on non-Bourdieuian methods of textual analysis, reworks Bourdieu's formulation of "fields," and seeks to complement Bourdieu's theories of subjectivity with psychoanalytic insights (19–21). Steinmetz deploys this method across fifteen chapters broken down into five thematic sections. These sections proceed from macro-level arguments about the relationship between sociology and empire to biographical case studies of individual sociologists.

Part I reconstructs the place of sociology in its imperial framework. Here, Steinmetz offers perhaps his most provocative argument, that the history of sociology in France suffers from a "disciplinary amnesia." This was despite the fact that "colonial sociologists made a number of *methodological* contributions" (30, original emphasis), and that sociologists redeployed concepts developed in the French colonies, such as primitivism, fetishism, sacrifice, and habitus, to metropolitan spaces (36–7). Despite these deep connections, Steinmetz argues, "The entire formation of colonial sociology has been actively repressed from historical writing on the history of sociology. *Repression* is the correct word for this. It captures the combination of individual and collective processes involved in burying memory. Colonial sociology has been subject to

²See Christy Pichichero, *The Military Enlightenment: War and Culture in the French Empire from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (Ithaca, 2021).

amnesia—another excellent term, when used in its psychoanalytic sense” (39, original emphasis). Steinmetz attributes this repression and amnesia to five factors. First is the underdevelopment of the history of sociology, especially with regard to professional historians, rather than sociologists writing this history, even though “French and Francophone scholars have produced a historiography of sociology with astonishing richness since the 1970s” (45). The second factor comes down to a sort of methodological presentism that rules out any form of “self-reflexivity or historicization” that might jeopardize its claims to being socially useful (46). The third factor Steinmetz attributes to a broader “*therapeutic forgetting*” in the wake of decolonization, a concept he takes from the sociologist Jacques Berque. If French society more broadly actively repressed the legacy of empire, then it is no surprise that sociologists coming of age in decolonization’s wake would also follow suit. A kind of “*epistemic contagion*” accounts for the fourth factor, with scholars actively incentivized to downplay their connections to colonialism for fear that a colonial stigma might attach. Finally, a form of “*metrocentrism*” in this history operates by classifying metropolitan studies of persons as sociology proper and any fieldwork conducted overseas as “*ethnology*” (48, original emphasis).

Part II places the field of sociology within the broader history of French empire, noting the constant movement of persons, goods, images, and ideas across imperial spaces. From popular culture in the period to the educational imperatives not only to deploy training within the empire, but also to develop scholars who specialized in imperial know-how, to the linkages between colonial developmentalist projects and metropolitan social-welfare policies, sociologists and sociological theories of empire were indispensable threads in the imperial fabric.

The third and fourth parts of Steinmetz’s study look at the “intellectual contexts” in which postwar French sociology operated; these chapters sketch a “sociology of French colonial sociology.” Here, the type of intellectual history presented most resembles recent studies of French sociology like Johan Heilbron’s, which connect the common preoccupations between sociology and related social sciences as well as the dynamics of professionalization that led sociologists to distinguish their efforts from studies like ethnology, history, and anthropology. In Heilbron’s account, the postwar period proved important with the creation of new research centers devoted to sociology, as well as questions about the continued relevance of Durkheimian paradigms in light of competing American empiricist approaches.³ Steinmetz’s treatment of this period builds on Heilbron’s analyses while adding in the missing necessary imperial contexts. Many of the institutions supporting sociological fieldwork and state-directed applied projects had either primary or auxiliary connections to maintaining French imperial rule. And although many of the colonial sociologists, or sociologists working in imperial settings, worked and taught outside the metropole, Steinmetz highlights their statistical presence relative to the profession. After 1946, according to Steinmetz, roughly half of all French sociologists worked on topics connected to France’s empire (182–3, and Appendices 2–5, 367–74). Conflicts like the Algerian War accelerated the rise of sociology’s prominence, particularly with regard to ethnology’s waning cultural

³Johan Heilbron, *French Sociology* (Ithaca, 2015), esp. Chs. 5, 6.

capital. Steinmetz attributes this shift to prominent ethnologists who supported retaining control of Algeria at all costs, most notably Jacques Soustelle, an anthropologist of Mesoamerica, former governor-general of Algeria, and coconspirator in assassination attempts against De Gaulle (143–5). (It is not the case that no sociologists could be implicated in dubious defenses of French empire, but many of the most important names in French sociology in this period, like Georges Balandier, Jacques Berque, or Pierre Bourdieu, had sufficient anticolonial clout.) Just as much as the empire framed developments within the field of sociology, debates internal to sociological theory in turn informed approaches to the study and governance of empire in this period.

The final chapter of Part IV, “Outline of a Theory of Colonial Sociological Practice,” contains some of the book’s most revelatory discussions of colonial sociologists. Here, Steinmetz highlights some of the most innovative sociologists of the period, who, in Steinmetz’s view, have been neglected either because they suffered from epistemic contagion or because their position on the periphery of metropolitan institutions kept them marginalized. It was one thing for the occasional sociologist who specialized in non-Western spaces to gain a prominent chair or teaching position in sociology in metropolitan France (like Berque or Balandier), but those sociologists who came from non-settler populations in imperial spaces, like N’Sougan Agblemagnon from Togo, were especially “invisible” to the wider profession (210). Others, like Albert Memmi, are far from invisible even today, though they are known more for being anticolonial or postcolonial writers than for their formal sociological vocation (218–19). Steinmetz reads the fact that many of these sociologists stayed in their home areas after formal independence as a sign of further erasure and exclusion (217). Perhaps future in-depth studies of individual figures will validate this hypothesis, but it seems at least plausible that some of these sociologists found reasons to continue working in their home areas as part of broader nationalist projects of nation building and intellectual autarky.

In Part V, Steinmetz presents brief biographical sketches of four key French sociologists whose work directly intersected with the French Empire: Raymond Aron, Jacques Berque, Georges Balandier, and Pierre Bourdieu. On the one hand, by focusing on these big names in French sociology, Steinmetz is able to drive home exactly how deeply the connections between sociology and empire go. (The cheeky suggestion that Raymond Aron might be considered a “postcolonial theorist” (246) perhaps stretches this line of thought a bit too far.) On the other hand, there is a good deal of secondary literature highlighting the life and thought of these four sociologists to date. Focusing on these four was perhaps a missed opportunity to highlight further the lesser-known figures encountered throughout the book, particularly women sociologists like Fanny Colonna, a student of Bourdieu’s who was born in Algeria, worked on Algerian subjects, and moved back and forth between Paris and Mouloud Mammeri University in Tizi Ouzou, or Claudine Chaulet, a French-born specialist on Algerian peasants who directly aided Algerian nationalists during the Algerian War and continued her career in Algeria after independence. The chapter on Bourdieu further strikes a slightly odd tone at times, with passages aiming to defend Bourdieu’s work against various critics. Given Steinmetz’s reliance on many of Bourdieu’s concepts, this was perhaps a necessary process of self-justification.

Steinmetz’s arguments about the extent to which there is a colonial lacuna in accounts of the history of sociology may strike some readers familiar with many of

his better-known figures' biographies as odd. Early on, Steinmetz asserts that "only now" are the imperial connections between social-scientific practice and imperial rule obvious (6). This assertion misses the fact that for much of the twentieth century, and even for many decades after France lost most of its imperial holdings, the connections were common sense to the practitioners whose lives straddled both periods, like Berque, Colonna, Chaulet, Bourdieu, or Abdelmalak Sayad. This is in part due to the participants' own lived experiences in imperial spaces and the imperial subject matter in which they specialized. For many in the social sciences in France, following the calls from figures like Berque, Bourdieu, or later Edward Said, reckoning with these relationships was of utmost importance. Commenting on a series of conferences in Paris dealing with Orientalism, Africanism, and Americanism (May 1974), along with Ethnology and Politics in the Maghreb (June 1975), the historian Henri Moniot noted,

The major questions surrounding the sciences of society, more so now than in the past, concern on the one hand the "knowledge" to be to be dispensed with, alongside all the conditions of that knowledge's production, and on the other hand, the demands, needs, and whims of various publics, with all the conditions placed on the uses of this knowledge (or the ways this knowledge is depicted).

The volume collecting interventions from sociologists like Fanny Colonna and Pierre Bourdieu took the apt title *Le mal de voir*, invoking the harms of the ethnographic gaze in the social sciences as well as the tainted assignments (*mal devoirs*) involving knowledge production and social utility.⁴ As late as the early 2000s, Bourdieu was still discussing these connections in his final book, *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*.⁵ Framed slightly differently, I think we could see this phenomenon as both a proliferation of biographical and self-critical discussions of sociology connected to the French Empire and the simultaneous exclusion of those referents from discussions of the sociological canon aimed at future generations of sociologists. From the other direction, despite the titular claim to pinning down "origins," we should see Steinmetz's book as a complement to earlier studies examining social-scientific connections to empire and "social thought" in France.⁶ These might be antecedent to the formulation of a sociological field in neo-Bourdieuian terms, but they do point to a much deeper genealogy. Scholars wishing to pursue Steinmetz's thesis further may wish to try to nail down these competing chronologies as well as to reckon with possible other afterlives of empire—for instance, whether or not there remain imperial continuities from the period Steinmetz covers with contemporary France's overseas collectivities (COM) such as French Polynesia and departments (DOM) such as Martinique or Réunion,

⁴Henri Moniot, "Présentation," in *Le mal de voir. Ethnologie et orientalisme: Politique et épistémologie, critique et autocritique ...* Cahiers Jussieu 2 (Paris, 1976), 7–10, at 7.

⁵Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (Paris, 2004), translated as Pierre Bourdieu, *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*, trans. Richard Nice (Chicago, 2005).

⁶For example, Pichichero, *The Military Enlightenment*; Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*; Lorcin, *Imperial Identities*; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2006); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, 2003). Steinmetz does mention some of these nineteenth-century connections in passing, but his focus is on the first half of the twentieth century.

places where there is absolutely reason for people to see French sociological study and practice as implicated in colonialism. The same question hangs regarding sociological studies of metropolitan issues such as Islamophobia, discussions of which directly implicate the metropole's connection to former imperial spaces.⁷

The ways this book shows the overwhelming connections between sociology as a discipline in France and the French Empire encourages readers to ask, how did concrete relations in colonial fieldwork shape French social knowledge? To stretch Steinmetz's (and Bourdieu's) analytic term of sociological "field" a bit, we might consider thinking more deeply about the concrete relations inherent in colonial fieldwork. Steinmetz convincingly points to ways in which relationships within the discipline of sociology affected which forms of knowledge became dominant in the wake of the French Empire. But what of the relationships between sociologists and the people they studied? (In some cases, like Steinmetz's discussion of Raymond Aron, the level of sociological analysis was far removed from relating to actual colonial subjects, but Aron's arm-chair sociologizing appears as an outlier in Steinmetz's discussions.) These otherwise silent relations do appear at points in Steinmetz's book: the local Algerian official Caïd Zeddour casting a defiant and mistrustful gaze at French psychologists conducting tests on his neighbors in Algeria in the 1950s (Figure 6.2, 114, 116), or the reliance of the Office of Colonial Scientific Research (ORSTOM) on local translators, manual laborers, and technicians to produce social knowledge about and for the empire (89–91). A line of enquiry building on the vast research Steinmetz has put together that systematically pursued these relationships further could prove fruitful. Scholars of empire for many decades now have shown that these strategic positionings between colonizer and colonized—to use two too abstract poles—punctuated the rhythms of the everyday imperial world. For example, recent work has explained that the specific social interventions in Algeria promoted by the French military (often with the help of sociologists, as Steinmetz notes) were key sites of these strategic interactions. The French government's war over hearts and minds in Algeria assumed that colonized populations were malleable and reactionary groups who could be effectively managed by social intervention. They were wrong.⁸ To what extent might modern French social theory have imported the same assumptions about the colonial populations they studied? To what extent might those same assumptions have been reapplied in the social theories that then doubled back into metropolitan spaces, scrubbed of their original colonial origins? Here I recall William Pietz's classic analyses of the concept of the fetish and the ways interactions between Portuguese and Dutch colonizers in West Africa transformed into one of the key terms of social analysis for Marx and Freud. If one were to approach sociological theories that Steinmetz analyses in this manner, emphasis would shift from strategic relations within the *academic field* of professional sociologists and the related (impersonal) material conditions toward strategic interactions between sociologists and the persons with whom they interacted in the *colonial*

⁷ Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed, *Islamophobia in France: The Construction of the "Muslim Problem"*, trans. Steve Garner (Athens, 2023).

⁸ On this issue see MacMaster, *War in the Mountains*; Terrence Peterson, *Revolutionary Warfare: How the Algerian War Made Modern Counterinsurgency* (Ithaca, 2024), 86. We could also note that social reformers in metropolitan spaces carried similar beliefs about the impoverished working classes.

field. One of the upshots of Steinmetz's insistence on recovering the colonial contexts of French sociology is precisely to provoke his readers to question how this silenced referent might echo in contemporary French sociological theory and practice. For Steinmetz, the point is to rely on a form of Bourdieusian reflexivity, noting the origins of French social theory while not assuming those origins are determinant. We would then be in a situation to plausibly ask whether one set of older imperial "problem-ideas" (to use Pietz's terminology) frames our contemporary ones, or whether contemporary French sociology has transcended its imperial genesis.⁹ Steinmetz concludes his book by defending his focus on Pierre Bourdieu throughout, arguing that Bourdieu's thought gave rise "to a general sociology and social theory that transcended the colonial context" (352). This is perhaps true, but throughout his life Bourdieu kept returning to his thought's colonial roots, which makes one wonder whether Bourdieu believed his theories had successfully transcended that context. I pose these questions not to diminish the value of Steinmetz's book but to think through future directions for research given the forcefulness of his argument that we need to take seriously the deep connections between the French Empire and important strains in twentieth-century sociological theory.

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If Steinmetz presents a near-comprehensive survey of the connections between sociology and empire in the mid-twentieth century, Amín Pérez's *Bourdieu & Sayad against Empire* presents a finer-grained analysis of the connections between lived colonial experience, political action, and politically engaged sociological thought. In his study, the outcome of dissertation work on the same topic, Pérez draws not only on published writings from Abdelmalak Sayad and Pierre Bourdieu in the 1950s and 1960s, but also on unpublished papers from the two sociologists' estates and interviews with their surviving friends and interlocutors. The resulting product "describes how, in a historical moment marked by violence, a singular encounter made sociology a counter-power to state science because its production offered knowledge useful for political action and social emancipation" (1). The climax of Pérez's study focuses on Sayad's and Bourdieu's coauthored *Le déracinement: La crise de l'agriculture traditionnelle en Algérie* (1964), which the two conducted as an antiessentialist and anti-orientalist sociology that might provide resources for similarly anti-reductivist politics.

Avoiding the sometimes fraught question of pinning down singular origins, Pérez's study ably demonstrates how Bourdieu's and Sayad's separate biographical and contextual trajectories intersected and how the results of their collaborations ramified. Given Bourdieu's comparative fame in the field of sociology and the intellectual history of the twentieth century, the time and weight placed on focusing on Sayad's life and intellectual development are a testament to Pérez's study. Many chapters, including the first two, begin not with a discussion of Bourdieu, but rather with Sayad and the political situation in Algeria.

The imperial frame certainly shaped Sayad's life from the beginning. Born into a family with connections to the 1871 Mokrani rebellion against French rule, Sayad and

⁹William Pietz, *The Problem of the Fetish*, ed. Francesco Pellizzi, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Ben Kafka (Chicago, 2022).

his father also accessed the French education system, setting the family apart from most non-settler subjects in Algeria. In the 1940s and 1950s when he was beginning his training as a teacher, Sayad's close relatives were involved with nationalist groups while he began reading Algerian anticolonial writers and learned Arabic from Mostefa Lacheraf, a future Algerian Front de libération nationale (FLN) militant and historian of Algerian politics. As Pérez explains, at the start of the Algerian War in November 1954, "Sayad was politicized, deeply hostile to the logic of colonial domination, and favorable to nationalist movements, but at the same time lucid about the contradictions and power struggles in local groups that had marked the fate of his family" (22). In this discussion of Sayad's background, Pérez highlights the range of political options available to critics of the French status quo and the evolution of Sayad's critiques across the Algerian War and the independent Algerian state under the FLN. He is also able to show that well before he met Bourdieu in 1958, Sayad's early lived experience of being torn between indigenous tradition and imperial conditions had much to offer their future studies on Kabyle peasants forced into capitalist logics.

In contrast to Steinmetz's emphasis on the Algerian War as a key factor in understanding Bourdieu's early sociological work and politics, Pérez highlights how earlier experiences under the Nazi Occupation and Bourdieu's father's syndical work were important aspects of his commitment to forms of political resistance. The young Bourdieu was an antimilitarist with a "bad attitude" (48). Both Steinmetz and Pérez note that Bourdieu was interested in working on a dissertation dealing with the phenomenology of emotional states before he was called up to serve in Algeria. Even though the war would reorient his thinking in important respects, these fundamental interests in emotions, temporality, and lived experience would continue (34). Pérez explains, "Bourdieu's shift from philosophy to ethnology took place in the midst of a conflict that disrupted intellectual careers, which usually follow a regular pattern. In his first texts, which targeted the intelligentsia of Paris and Algiers, he questioned those who claimed to be theorizing colonial society and the war situation" (60). Rather than the Algerian War being a moment of total conversion to a new outlook, the sociological and demographic studies that Bourdieu conducted for the government provided him a different set of opportunities for thinking through these earlier preoccupations: mental states and understandings of time, rural labor under capitalism, and class structures.

Through this discussion of Bourdieu's and Sayad's twin trajectories, we can see one model of dynamic change from within the professional sociological field and the concrete relations between collaboration and fieldwork. As Pérez puts it,

The paths of Sayad and Bourdieu, so far apart at the start, gradually converged. The friendly and intellectual relations that they forged from 1958 onward stemmed from the proximity of their trajectories in the context of colonial war, of the impasses that they experienced in their respective environments while they were haunted by the need to feel useful to those who suffered from unequal conditions worsened tenfold by the violence of the confrontations. This led them to modify their academic careers by keeping their distance from conservative scientism and resisting revolutionary mirages. (57)

There was undoubtedly an asymmetry in the Bourdieu–Sayad dyad, but this asymmetry is partly what animated the insights of their work (74). Bourdieu relied on Sayad's intimate knowledge of Kabyle society and his ability to gain access to Kabyle spaces and voices. Sayad drew from Bourdieu's institutional connections and ability to think comparatively about peasant societies in industrial conditions, comparing Bourdieu's native Béarn in the Pyrenees with mountainous Kabylia (91, 119–20).

In this analysis of the parallel tracks of Bourdieu–France and Sayad–Algeria we see why some “colonial” sociologists in the wake of independence, like Sayad, might opt to stay engaged with the politics of their native countries, and what sociological work could mean for a decolonizing country (rather than just the metropole refashioned by decolonization). Though Sayad worked as an independent researcher in France after 1962 before getting a full-time position at the CNRS in 1977, he remained engaged in political projects like the Socialist Forces Front, a post-independence party critical of the FLN, and continued to conduct sociological work aimed at analyzing the inequalities that persisted in Algeria after 1962. Pérez also provides more texture to the processes of colonial sociological amnesia that Steinmetz sees at work in France—after 1962, since sociology was meant to be a useful applied discipline, once Algeria was out of the picture, the use value of studies on Algeria was not as evident as before. A full third of reviews of *Le déracinement* came from anglophone audiences who remained interested in questions surrounding movements for decolonization (161–2).

In an epilogue, Pérez connects his relationship with Sayad and Bourdieu to his father's militant activism in the Dominican Republic, a home country which Pérez fled decades ago. Graduate training in sociology initially disillusioned Pérez from the political potential the field had to offer. This book was an attempt at personal reenchantment and an object lesson for readers: “I wanted to show that it is precisely by describing the complexities of social reality, and in particular the processes of domination, that it is possible to formulate political alternatives and support social resistance” (175–6). If a phenomenon like “epistemic contagion” could contribute to the active repression of the colonial contexts from which sociological theories emerged, Pérez suggests why scrutiny of those origins could provide resources, if only provisional ones, for present antidote.